

MINUTES Telecommunications Commission - September 25, 2008

I. Call to Order

Vice chair Thomas Kimbrell called the meeting to order at 7:10 p.m. in the County Administration conference room in the Administration Center, located at 1300 Courthouse Road.

II. Roll Call

The following members were present: Thomas Kimbrell, Alicia Knight, Danielle Davis, John Johnson and Ed Sullivan. Also in attendance were Marie Schuler and Tami Watkins representing Comcast; Jaybo Johnson with Cox; and Catherine Hogan-Lewis and Paul Miller with Verizon. Michele Lansford, Public Information Office, represented the County.

III. Presentations by the Public

Maj. Lawson Brannan, 3 Bella Vista Court, requested an update on the builtout plans for the Aquia Overlook development that he raised at the August 2008 meeting. Ms. Watkins said she had sent him an e-mail earlier in the day explaining that Comcast is continuing to look at service in that neighborhood, and has requested funding to begin the construction phase. She said, however, that there is no timeline for buildout. Ms. Schuler said the timeline for approval depends on construction projects already on the books, and that Aquia Overlook was not included in the 2008 schedule. She said it could be 90 – 120 days before the funding request is approved.

In response to a question from Mr. Kimbrell, Ms. Schuler replied that the company starts its budget process in July of each year, working with developers to determine construction plans. Comcast's budget cycle is based on the calendar year.

Mr. John Johnson asked how construction is handled when it is "out of the cycle." She replied that a survey is done, the developer is consulted, a construction cost estimate is prepared based on design requirements, and the project is submitted to corporate for a decision.

Maj. Brannan said that his neighborhood is one year old, and has 15 occupied dwellings. In response to a question from Ms. Davis, he said the developer had contacted Comcast. Ms. Schuler said that the Major lives in phase two of the subdivision; the first phase has cable service; and Comcast is committed to providing service in the new section.

Maj. Brannan requested weekly updates from Comcast which he will share with his neighbors. Tami Watkins will also send updates to the County to be forwarded to the commission.

Mr. Kerry Hardaway, 50 Edrington Court (who also lives in the new section of Aquia Overlook) requested that the county write a letter to Comcast requesting details about construction plans and a timeline.

Mr. Kimbrell said that the franchise agreement doesn't specify a timeframe for cable service to be implemented once a subdivision meets the density threshold.

Ms. Knight suggested that Comcast send a letter to the commission and to County Administration outlining the funding process and timetable for construction and service in Aquia Overlook. Ms. Schuler said she will meet with the legal department, and that the letter should be finalized within a few weeks – she will forward it to the commission and County representatives, who will provide it to the residents of Aquia Overlook.

IV. Approval of Minutes

Mr. Sullivan moved to approve the August 2008 minutes; Ms. Davis seconded the motion; the motion was approved unanimously.

V. Members' Concerns

Ms. Davis requested an update about the problems that five residents on Coal Landing Road have been experiencing for the past 15 months. She said that Comcast service representatives told every customer who called a different story. She said she called on behalf of the residents about the same issue on many different occasions, and was given a different cause for the problem each time. Ms. Davis said that although the residents and she were promised that their calls would be returned, they weren't, and that no one was ever allowed to speak to a supervisor. She said that Comcast customer service is very poor, totally unacceptable.

Ms. Schuler said she would relay the information to corporate. She also told the commission that the node serving the area handles "quite a few" customers, and that the five homes at the end of the line can have no service when everyone else does. She said the residents were given Dennis Casey's phone number, to which Ms. Davis replied that he did not return any calls or forward them to someone else for a response.

Mr. Kimbrell said the issue is unreturned phone calls and messages, and that this type of poor customer service is endemic to Comcast. He said the customer service representatives need better training and should be more responsible.

Ms. Watkins said the cause of the problem was an exposed cable, but that the cable has been buried. When she said the residents have her direct contact information, Ms. Davis said she wants to be copied on any e-mail exchanges – Ms. Watkins agreed.

Mr. John Johnson asked if the "800" number on statements is the correct one to call, to which Ms. Davis replied that it is.

Ms. Knight asked for an update on 9 Lupine Drive. Ms. Watkins said she spoke with Mr. Jones just prior to the commission meeting and told him that construction would begin in the first half of 2009. She said she will keep him informed of the schedule.

Ms. Davis asked on what date Comcast submitted a budget request to provide service to Mr. Cweiki on Mount View Road. Ms. Schuler replied that the work should be completed by October 10, 2008, and that installation will be scheduled after that. She said she will provide Mr. Cweiki with this information.

Valerie Cottongim, public information officer for the school system, asked Catherine Hogan-Lewis if the schools had been assigned an educational channel – she replied that there was a dedicated channel. Ms. Cottongim also asked if Ms. Hogan-Lewis could provide information about the level of service being provided among the schools in the County – she said she would.

Mr. Sullivan provided his new e-mail address: desulliva@aol.com.

VI. Agenda Additions

Ms. Hogan-Lewis said Verizon is working in south Stafford (Falmouth), and that citizens can determine when crews will be on their streets by accessing www.verizon.com/Virginia. The site is updated monthly, and once streets are listed residents can expect to see crews in 30 – 60 days.

In reply to a question from Ms. Davis, Ms. Hogan-Lewis said that drops are installed by Verizon personnel after contractors dig the trenches. She said that Verizon hangs notices on front doors just prior to construction. Mr. Sullivan said the crews who worked in his neighborhood were “great,” and that his neighbors were pleased at the lack of damage and interruptions.

In response to questions about a timeline for buildout in the Devon Green and Potomac Run neighborhoods, Ms. Hogan-Lewis said that she will do some research and let the commission know.

Mr. Kimbrell said that a “very nice” Verizon salesman visited his home. He also told Mr. Jaybo Johnson that when a Stafford Utilities Department crew nicked the Cox cable, the lines were quickly repaired.

Ms. Hogan-Lewis introduced Paul Miller, Verizon’s franchise service manager for Stafford County. Mr. Miller will notify the County about changes in programming and rates, and will respond to FiOS complaints from citizens.

VII. New Business

Broadband

Ms. Hogan-Lewis said she is a member of a Governor’s Roundtable that is discussing broadband issues, including tools that more densely populated localities like Stafford and Spotsylvania can use to offer underserved areas broadband options. She will e-mail the information to Ms. Lansford, who will in turn provide it to the commission.

Commission members discussed broadband issues, the Virginia Web site that displays maps detailing coverage, and funding sources. Ms. Knight asked staff to include David Gayle, the

County's legislative liaison, in any communications about broadband. The commission may make a recommendation to the Board of Supervisors that they support certain bills that may be considered by the legislature.

Public Access Programming

Mr. Sullivan reported that Dr. Sawyer, superintendent of schools, is enthusiastic about student involvement in program production. The commission discussed entering into an agreement with the school system, looking at grants for funding, use of studios at the schools, and setting up a non-profit group to manage the initiative. Mr. Sullivan, Ms. Davis and Ms. Knight will meet with both Dr. Sawyer and Pamela Hanines for further discussions.

Ms. Knight requested that County staff determine the amount of franchise and PEG fees that the County has collected to date and forward that information to commission members.

VIII. Adjournment

At 8:50 p.m., Ms. Davis moved to adjourn the meeting; Mr. John Johnson seconded; the motion passed unanimously.